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The Care and Feeding of Online Rituals

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I. Is Online Ritual possible?

You have some Pagan friends with whom you exchange email. You would like to do a ritual with them, but online is the only real option you have for getting together.

Problem: all you can see, all anyone can see, online are words on a computer screen.

Problem: all you can send to other people online are words on a computer screen.

You can't share your drumming or your dancing with these people, you can't hold hands or use vocal intonations, they can't see the candles you light or smell the incense you burn ... or can they? Is it possible, in any meaningful sense of the word, to cast a circle and raise energy by use of computer and modem? I submit that it is.

In this class, I will teach you how to craft and lead a ritual that makes full use of the computer and cyberspace as a medium for magick. I will not teach you how to access the internet. I assume that you are familiar with logging onto a bulletin board, chat room, or other place where an online ritual might be held.

This class will detail some of my experiences in online worship. I will talk about the advantages and disadvantages of cyberspace as a medium for magick. I will go over specific details of crafting and leading an electronic ritual. I will share some of the tricks of the trade I have run across, and some necessary contingency plans.

The CompuServe 1994 Yule Ritual is a companion document. It contains many examples of points that will be brought out in this lecture, both good and bad.

A. History of Changing Medium

There is a perception in the Pagan community that a nature religion can not possible be fully compatible with the internet. It is not within the scope of this class to try to convince you otherwise. However, let me say a few brief words on why I believe that TechnoPaganism is not an oxymoron.

Pagans are not, a priori, luddites. It is a basic tenant of most Pagans that moral and ethical lessons can be found in the natural world. If we are part of the natural world, then so are our tools. It is a mistake to assume the natural world, in this context, means outside the city limits. It boils down to this: technology is part of the natural world.

Would any of you deny that legitimate worship services occur via television? I dare say a paradigm shift had to occur when worship services moved from the realm of radio to television. A similar paradigm shift probably occurred when worship moved from the pulpit to broadcast radio ... and when it moved from hand-written word to the printing press ... and when it moved from oral history to the written word ...

Meaningful worship is independent of the technological level of the worshiper. Online rituals are, in my experience, as powerful and transformational as any ritual in the face to face world.

II. Cyberspace as Ritual Space

Cyberspace is a method of communication, and as such can be used for worship. Like any other medium, it has advantages and disadvantages.

A. Advantages

Communication in cyberspace manifests itself as text on a screen. Believe it or not, this is an advantage. Simple text on a boring screen can lend it self to entering altered states. It emphasizes and engenders imagination.

In cyberspace, you can have the coven fly in on the backs of dragons. You can walk them through a mirror to the dark side of the moon, or have them dance with the faerie. You can have the sun shining in the middle of the night, have lightening crackling across the sky on a clear day and you can have it snow in the middle of summer and you can have it all in the most vibrant, tactile detail.

B. Disadvantages

The nature of cyberspace makes it difficult to control who is there for ritual, and who stays. Thunderstorms, bad modems, and busy phone lines can prevent people from making it to circle, or even cause them to disappear during ritual. It's simply the nature of the medium. Specific ways to deal with these disadvantages are covered later under contingency plans.

III. Writing Online Rituals

A. Tone and Ambiance

In a more traditional ritual setting, there are many forms of communication going on. There are the words heard, the tone and intonation of the words, the body language, the mood set by candles and altar, etc. Because words are the only form of communication in an online ritual, tone becomes the primary consideration.

A cyberspace ritual must have a strong tone or feeling to it because you have to create the ambiance. A Yule ritual at home, for example, is easy to create: just put up some mistletoe, maybe a tree, set out a Yule log ... but in cyberspace you have many more basic decisions. Will it be a traditional wintry Yule? How about a South Western Yule with a desert setting? Should you go all the way north to the Arctic? Perhaps a Yule in a lighthouse with a stormy, winter ocean? Should we have a skating party?

The trouble with cyberspace and the joy of it is that you have a lot more options than you do in the real world. You can take your cybercoven anywhere: Athens, Stone Henge, Paris, you name it. Anywhen is also an option. Will you visit Atlantis before it sunk beneath the waves? How about Machu Picchu at the height of Incan civilization, or the library at Alexandra?

Setting and tone should relate to your purpose. If the purpose of the ritual is a solemn one, then choose a setting that mirrors that. A healing ritual should have a soothing setting. A ritual to raise energy should have lively setting, etc.

Take a look at the meaning of the ritual itself. If it's Yule, then the theme is the return of the sun. Beltane is lusty springtime and Mabon is all about balance. If you're doing a full moon ritual, consider in which Zodiac house the moon is. If the moon is in Leo, for example, you might want to consider a sun theme or a lion theme, perhaps a setting in the African veldt.

B. Audience Participation

Sitting and watching text flow across the screen can be dreadfully dull. It s important to let the audience participate in some way. It s important to let them feel like they are part of the ritual, not merely an outside observer.

The ritual should include something that makes the participant physically move. Examples are lighting a candle at an appropriate moment, encouraging the user to sing a familiar chant or song, contributing his thoughts and wishes as part of the ritual, and helping cast the circle with athame in hand.

C. Time limits

Even the best of rituals begin to lose effectiveness rapidly if they drag on too long. Online rituals are no exception. Not only do the participants minds begin to wander, but the ritual facilitators doing the typing start getting real cranky. I would suggest two hours as an outside limit. One to one and a half hours is optimum.

Equating ritual length in terms of time and characters just takes some practice. I would suggest breaking the ritual into 4 parts of 1500-2000 characters each:

- An introductory part where you lead the group into the setting you've created for them and/or where you have your group ground and center. This is where you cast the circle, call quarters and state purpose.
- The body of the ritual: meditations, magick, etc.
- Sending off a cone of power. Don't forget to tell people to ground, and don't forget to do it yourself.
- Conclusion: releasing quarters, opening the circle.

This will take about an hour to conduct on line. Two things to remember:

First, you're going to be doing a lot of typing. Don't go overboard on descriptions unless you are a competent typist.

Second, there will be parts during the ritual where you will get responses, and where you may ask others to name their wants, desires, fears, etc. These will take time, so take them into consideration when planning out your ritual.

D. Marginal Descriptions

The imagination of the participants is your single biggest tool. Use it to its fullest advantage. Do not describe the elements of your ritual in complete detail. Use general descriptions and let the participant build the particular details of their world. Not only can they do a better and quicker job than by you can by typing it in, but the world they build will be experienced on a much deeper and more personal level.

E. The Process

As an example, let's look at the process of crafting an online ritual. Let's go back to the African Veldt idea. It's a full moon ritual, and the moon is passing through Leo.

1. Crafting the Words

Create your setting. It's warm, the sun is bight, the animals hyenas, hawks, cranes, giraffes, gazelles and a pride of lions look on.

You have the cybercoven cast the circle. Let's do it with a flourish: when you tell them to point their Athame or finger or wand and sketch a circle round themselves (and everyone in cyberspace), add a visual. Perhaps a ring of magic fire follows their Athame, springing up to surround the coven, or rain encircles them, or mist or lightening or a shimmering veil.

You call quarters (in the CompuServe Pagan community, this is traditionally done by assistants, someone other than the HP or HPS). Maintain your theme in the calling of quarters. You want to infuse the quarters with the same feeling as the rest of the ritual. For this example, you might want to call four African deities or you might want to

give each quarter African imagery (example: "Come West, Power of water, hippopotamus and water buffalo, wide rivers and precious watering holes...."). And, once again, you can add a visual after each if you like a warm wind stirring the grasses after air is called, or perhaps birds flying over head.

You invoke the God/Goddess in the same manner. Be sure to maintain thematic imagery as you did for the quarters. You announce that the coven is now between worlds, and you state the purpose of the ritual.

Now, what magic are you going to have everyone do for this ritual? It can't be candle magic, you've got a blazing sun overhead and it's hot here in the Veldt. Also, the theme is Leo the lion: the focus of your ritual probably won't be something like healing. Remember: whatever you have the coveners do, it has to be something simple they can do at home while sitting in front of a computer.

My choice for a Leo ritual would be raising energy as the focus. Now what to do to create energy in this ritual? Let's ask that everyone bring a stone, preferably a cat-eye, to the ritual and infuse it with fiery energy so that, in the month to come, when they feel down or depressed or tired, they can hold the stone, and be re-energized. That's easy enough: no mess, no fumbling, no ruined keyboards.

Maintain the image and tone as you raise energy. Use the image of sparkling, desert sands when you raise your cone of power. You might tell people to imagine scooping up a handful of sand, infusing it with power till it sparkles, then tossing it out. You might have them envision the sand spreading out and spinning like the rings of Saturn.

Before closing the circle, don't forget to ground excess energy. This is as important online as it is off.

2. Quarter Callers

Here's what I recommend: for people calling the quarters:

- If you tell them to create their own callings, give them some idea of the theme so that their callings will fit. In the case of this example, tell them to imagine the African Veldt as they create their callings. Also emphasize to them that this is an energy ritual so that they give energy to their descriptions.
- Ask to see everyone's callings so that you can edit them.
- If you really want to set a time limit on the ritual, then either send your assistants the callings, or insist that all callings be no more than a certain number of lines long.

If you have people playing parts, and are allowing them to write the parts, once again, give them an idea not only of the theme, but the kind of part they are playing. If they're playing the crone, what sort of crone is she? Regal? Good humored? Gentle? Is she a Hecate (i.e., witchy and mysterious) crone or a Befana (i.e. generous and sweet and a little like Mrs. Santa Claus) crone? Will she be enthroned upon a mountain top, or come wandering up from the depths of a cavern? How will she look? You can work this out with the person playing the part.

Make use of your medium! Descriptions give your "readers" the picture here, so briefly describe: let them see your crone the way you want them to see her. This does not mean that you need to have a detailed description. You can offer a sketch and let the coveners fill in the blanks using their imagination. For example, "She is a silver-haired Lady, dressed in rich purple, her bearing regal." That's all you need.

Once again, have your players send you whatever they write and make sure it works within your ritual.

3. Partners

It's up to you whether this is going to be your show, or whether you want/need an equal partner. If it's going to be your show (you have a strong idea in your head about how this ritual is going to go), then make sure the person you pick as HP/HPS understands that; in this case you want someone who will say, "Just tell me what you want me to do!"

If you want/need an equal partner, pick someone who, when you tell them your idea for the ritual, says "That's what I had in mind, too!" A person on the same wavelength as you is wonderful! They can fill in all the blanks, feed you much needed suggestions, take care of half the things that need to be done.

What you do not want is a partnership where you bicker, or where there is a fight for control. A partnership has to be a synthesis: the two of you bringing forth something more wonderful than either of you could have done on your own.

4. Special Effects

Remember your medium! I can't emphasize this enough. Some people seem to think that when they do these rituals, what they do at home, if indicated, will be magically imagined by the other coveners at their homes. It doesn't work that way.

For example, you can include drumming in an online ritual. However, you can't just say "Drumming," drum for 5 minutes, and assume that everyone online can imagine that drumming. It may be very moving for you, but the other people can't hear your drumming. They can't even imagine it given what you've provided. They'll stare at their screen for five minutes, and the ritual loses all momentum, all energy.

Instead of saying "Drumming" say something like this:

> The HP begins to drum.
> Slow at first, a heavy, steady beat.
> The beat is speeding up.
> A counter beat: thump-thump, thump-thump.
> Can you hear it? Like a heart.
> Thump-thump, thump-thump.
> Faster.
> Faster.
> Now the drum is speeding, and your blood is matching the beat
> Faster, faster, wilder and wilder ...

See the difference? Your people at home can't hear the drum, but they can imagine it. Help them to imagine it: that is your job!

IV. Preparing for Online Rituals

A. Energy Concentration

As the day of the ritual draws near, participants began to think and wonder about the place where the circle will be cast, the tales heard and lessons learned during the ritual, the visions received, etc. All of this wondering on the part of the participants lends energy to the ritual site itself, and can be tapped during the ritual. In cyberspace, however, the place is literally created anew each time a ritual is cast. The same wondering on the part of the participants occurs. However, all the participants have as a focus prior to the ritual is the name of the HP and HPS. When you become HP/HPS for an online ritual, everyone who is going to participate in that ritual, consciously or unconsciously, starts to focus on you. An online ritual generates a lot of energy, far more energy than you might imagine. Powerful people from around the world, anticipating the ritual, focus their considerable energies on you. We've had rituals that have shut down computers, ended with lightening storms, left people shaking, floating, dizzy, and high. In short: do not underestimate the power of this ritual just because you're on the other side of a computer screen. Yes, if you are leading an online ritual, energy will get strange the week prior to ritual. It s normal. Be

prepared for it, and deal with it appropriately. Make sure you are freshly shielded, make sure you and everyone else is centered, make sure you ground. The energy you're getting from everyone is powerful and you, the HP/S, are channeling it. Be prepared! Some ladies have compared it to having an extra period that month.

B. Pre-Ritual Announcements

I would suggest sending out an announcement a week before ritual, and again 2 days before ritual. It should include date, time, location, person acting as circle guardian, and required items. Keep in mind that there is not much space around a keyboard, so required items should be kept to a minimum. Melted wax, and liquids in general, don t mix well with most keyboards. The announcement should include at least the following:

1. Remind people of the Ritual itself, the time and date.
2. Tell them the purpose ("We're going to focus on healing," "We're going to focus on raising energy," "This is to celebrate the longest night of the year and the sun's return," etc.).
3. Tell them what they need to have on them for the ritual (a cup of fruit juice, a candle, a sprig of sage, a stone they wish to infuse with energy, etc.). Don't ask them to bring too many things: just what's needed to participate in the magick part of the ritual. If they wish to have the additional alter items (a bowl of salt, Athame, wand, incense, etc.), that's up to them. When the time arrives for the ritual, remind the people about what they need one last time, and give them 5-10 minutes to fetch the items, to get a drink, lock doors, turn down the sound on the answering machine, let out the dog, go to the bathroom, etc.

C. Physical Ritual Space When facilitating an online ritual, you should take all the steps you would with a face to face ritual. Your computer and your altar must be incorporated into the same area.

1. Cleansing The area around your computer should be cleansed as a ritual area. I would not recommend saltwater or incense, however: use more esoteric methods. It is perfectly okay, and even desirable, to do a ritual blessing of your computer. Keep the area free of clutter. For the duration of the ritual, your computer is a ritual tool: treat it as such.
2. Decoration If you are leading a ritual, it is paramount that you get into the right frame of mind. The fact that you're using a computer does not change that. Decorate the computer as you would any altar. Let your subconscious mind know that you intend to do magick here. If it is Yule, put some holly around the monitor. If it is Oestara, put out the painted eggs next to the keyboard.
3. Shielding Shield yourself as you would for any ritual. Realize, however, that energy must get both in and out through the phone line. If you are really good at shielding, you may have to come up with a visualization that specifically allows for such communication. It helps me to visualize the phone line going out the east. Electricity and magnetism look a lot like air to my subconscious mind.
4. Altar The computer should be at least in the circle near the altar. I would suggest setting up the altar around the computer itself. Please remember that melted candle wax and a chalice full of ale do not generally mix well with keyboards. You will be doing a fair amount of typing, so leave room for a hard copy of the ritual to be in plain view.

V. Leading Online Rituals

These are a few tricks of the trade I have learned along the way which make leading online rituals both easier and snazzier.

a. Leadership Team Window
   Many operating systems, CompuServe in particular, will allow you to set up a private group within the larger group. This is ideal for the leadership team. It provides a place where the ritual facilitators can prompt each other with "2 minute warnings," give encouragement, or direct the door guards to deal with a heckler that has just shown up.

b. GA Symbols

People have different typing speeds, so you often can't be sure when they're finished. Establish an "I'm finished" symbol. Most people use GA, which stands for go ahead. I would suggest personal symbols for each member of the ritual team. For instance, during the CompuServe Yule ritual, the symbols %, #, $, >, =, <, ^, +, and &, were used respectively for HP, HPS, Storyteller, East, South, West, North, Center, and Befana. They are an effective way to cue the next speaker to take over immediately, whether scheduled or not. It is also less obtrusive for the participant than GA or go ahead. A personal example: the HPS ending a paragraph with a % (my symbol) about a third of a page early. I took over, and did not discover until after the ritual that the HPS had misplaced a page of ritual notes. The coveners had been seeing our symbols since the ritual started, so they never discovered our minor catastrophe.

c. Scripts

I recommend using scripted rituals online, i.e., the ritual is completely written and distributed to the ritual team beforehand. This allows members of the ritual team to take over for each other in case someone should get dropped and not be able to log back in immediately. I'm not saying that you need to write the entire ritual yourself: rather, just make sure every one on the ritual team has a complete copy before going on line.

d. Impromptu BB's

As much as possible, encourage people to speak up during online rituals, to say "So mote it be!" or "Blessed be!" if moved to do so, to make requests, to take part in the magic. You need these responses because, otherwise, it's hard to know anyone's there. Encourage the coveners to be spontaneous: they give energy and power to the ritual. Such spontaneity seems to make participants separated by miles into a group so close that they might well all be in the same room. VI. Contingency Plans Cyberspace is a wonderful place to cast a circle and raise energy. As a medium for magick, however, it does have a few pitfalls that you need to prepare for.

A. Getting Dropped

Let's go back to our Full Moon in Leo Energy ritual for a moment. It's time to raise a cone of power. "I have it all worked out," you say. "I'm going to have the coven call up a fire in their palm, filled with wishes and energy, toss it out, and then have it swirl up like a firestorm. My HP/HPS is going to type in that visualization." Well, that does sound wonderful. "Time to raise the cone of power!" you say, and then you wait for you HP/HPS to say their bit. And you wait. And you wait. A minute passes. Nothing. Two minutes ... still nothing. Three minutes. Flaky modems, noisy phone lines, and intervening thunderstorms are simply part of the landscape in cyberspace. These things can happen and, since you can't see what's going on on the other side of the screen, it's hard to know what to do. That's why you need contingency plans. Here's a basic list of what can you do:

1. Make sure everything is in working order: your hard drive, computer, monitor and modem. Make sure that you have plenty of memory on the computer as well.
2. Check the weather reports and make sure there aren't any thunderstorms on the horizon.
3. Make sure everyone on the ritual team has a phone list of other members. That way, if you get knocked off, or if an emergency occurs, someone can call you up and find out if you're all right and help you if you're not.
4. Make sure that two or three of you can run the ritual: you and your HP(S) for sure. You might want to have someone acting as a back up HP(S); a back-up HP(S) is someone you've sent a copy of the ritual to who can take over if you or your HP(S) vanishes suddenly and inexplicably.
5. Make sure everyone meets online about 15 minutes before the ritual to iron out any last minute problems. These were the contingency plans for the 1994 CompuServe Yule ritual. Remember here, that Yule 1994 was a big to-do ritual: we had the gift exchange going, several dozen people participating, and eight people on the leadership team. The contingency plans wouldn't have been nearly so complex had it been a simple New Moon ritual.

6. We had a clandestine window open during the entire ritual for Team Yule folk only. We had everyone on the team log into the window and keep it open (providing their software permitted) though out the ritual. This allowed us to know if a person disappeared, because the window would tell us if they did; it allowed us to exchange instructions answer questions and cue people during the ritual if necessary, and to inform everyone if there was a problem.
7. People were informed that, if they got thrown off line during their calling/part, we would wait about 2 minutes for them to get back on, then the HPS would take over their part. We urged them to try to get back online for about 3-5 minutes, then leave the phone line open (if they had only one) so that we could call them. The HP was designated as caller here because he was familiar with computers and modems, and could possibly help them get back on.
8. The HP was in charge of phoning people if they vanished during a calling, dismissal or part, and to call the HPS if she vanished at any time.
9. The job of the HPS was to take over the part of anyone who went off line unless that person was the HP. If he went off line, the Assistant HPS was to take over, and the HPS was to call the HP and find out what happened.
10. The Job of the Assistant was to take over if either the HP or HPS went off line, and to keep typing in the ritual until instructed otherwise. Meanwhile the HP(S) would call the missing HP(S). If the missing HP(S) could not get back on line, the assistant was to take over their part.
11. If Both the HP and the HPS went off line simultaneously (or one after the other), the Assistant was to put the ritual on hold, play some jazzy hold music for the coveners, and phone the HPS first. Meanwhile, she was to type up experiencing technical difficulties a few times and keep the music playing.
12. If both HP and HPS were found to be permanently off line, unable to get back on, then the Assistant was to say "Hey, everyone, why don't we just forget about the ritual and open our presents!"

B. When Bubba comes Visiting

"Ok," you say, "I've got all my contingency plans. Everyone knows their parts, everything's working, everyone's well. Now, what can go wrong?" Well, there is one more problem: this is ritual is taking place online. That means you can't keep anyone out of it. That means that Bubba the survivalist computer nerd, who's wandered into the online ritual room, is free to heckle the ritual team. What can you do? One thing that may help is to have the Sysop as a member of the ritual team. That way, if Bubba doesn't want to behave, it might be possible to lock him out of the room. Failing that, simply take it in stride. It's the nature of the medium.

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